

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., on Wednesday touted a \$500,000 congressional earmark that he's obtained to help Omaha with the federally required overhaul of its sewers.

But it would take 3,200 such earmarks to cover the \$1.6 billion price tag estimated for the project.

"It's a drop in a bucket, but that's \$500,000 they didn't have before," Terry said.

Marty Grate, the City of Omaha's environmental services manager, said that the city has been accumulating funds, held by the Environmental Protection Agency, over the years through congressional earmarks for sewer projects.

The city cashed in some of that to help pay for the initial \$24.6 million study of the sewer situation and has another \$2 million available, Grate said. Omaha also got nearly \$2 million for sewer projects through the economic stimulus bill, he said.

Still, the project is expected to require \$150 million a year once it really gets going.

The overhaul is necessary because the city has sewer pipes that carry both storm water and wastewater. That means that if it rains enough, the storm water overflows the system and carries raw sewage into waterways. The EPA says Omaha must stop the overflows.

The city's plan, which has not been finalized, calls for major sewer separation projects, two new treatment facilities and a deep tunnel.

Given the huge costs involved, the federal funding so far doesn't make a splash.

"We appreciate every federal dollar that they're able to get for us, but we have tried to be very careful in communicating with the public that we don't believe that federal earmarks are going to be a significant solution to this large mandate," Grate said.

Instead, the burden of the overhaul will fall squarely on those paying sewer fees.

The latest forecasts show those fees for a typical household going from \$15 a month in 2010 to \$32 a month in 2014 and up from there, Grate said.

Terry said he'll keep working on the issue. He said other cities facing the same problem could find themselves bankrupt.

Congress could address the situation by rolling back the requirements or by providing substantial funding, he said.

